

The decades following the American Revolution are the most generative in the history of American religion and some of the most creative in the history of Christianity. In basic ways, the American religious landscape today looks more like the scene of 1830 than that of 1800 resembles the situation of 1800. Historians have understood this hothouse period as one in which upstart evangelical Protestants inherit the more democratic and egalitarian impulses of the American Revolution and continue the project of liberal democratization launched by the nationalist revolution. This paper makes two contributions, one negative and one positive, to the study of religion and politics in the early American republic. First, it shows that popular religion in the United States began independently of the nation-state. Secondly, the essay suggests ways in which American nationalism drew political, organizational, and mystical resources from Protestant Christianity. In the process, it places the case of the United States in the context of a growing and suggestive historical literature on the role of religion in the development of modern nationalism.